THE NEGRO SPIRITUAL SPEAKS OF LIFE AND DEATH



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Being the Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man, 1947

by

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K-W

This Ingersoll Lecture is to appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin.*

TO

my mother and

grandmother

The Ingersoll Lectureship

Extract from the will of Miss Caroline Haskell Ingersoll, who died in Keene, County of Cheshire, New Hampshire, Jan. 26, 1893

First. In carrying out the wishes of my late beloved father, George Goldthwait Ingersoll, as declared by him in his last will and testament, I give and bequeath to Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., where my late father was graduated, and which he always held in love and honor, the sum of Five thousand dollars ($5,000) as a fund for the establishment of a Lectureship on a plan somewhat similar to that of the Dudleian Lecture, that is—one lecture to be delivered each year, on any convenient day between the last day of May and the first day of December, on this subject, "the Immortality of Man," said lecture not to form a part of the usual college course, nor to be delivered by any Professor or Tutor as part of his usual routine of instruction, though any such Professor or Tutor may be appointed to such service. The choice of said lecturer is not to be limited to any one religious denomination, nor to any one profession, but may be that of either clergyman or layman, the appointment to take place at least six months before the delivery of said lecture. The above

sum to be safely invested and three fourths of the annual interest thereof to be paid to the lecturer for his services and the remaining fourth to be expended in the publishment and gratuitous distribution of the lecture, a copy of which is always to be furnished by the lecturer for such purpose. The same lecture to be named and known as "the Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man."



THE NEGRO SPIRITUAL SPEAKS OF LIFE AND DEATH



THE mystery of life and death persists despite the exhaustless and exhaustive treatment it has been given in song and story, philosophy and science, in art and religion. The human spirit is so involved in the endless cycle of birth, of living and dying, that in some sense each man is an authority, a key interpreter of the meaning of the totality of the experience. The testimony of the individual, then, is always fresh if he is able to make himself articulate to his fellows. Even when he is not, there is the persistent conviction that in some profound sense he himself knows and understands. When the external circumstances of life are dramatic or unusual, causing the human spirit to make demands upon all the reaches of its resourcefulness in order to keep from being engulfed, then the value of its findings

made articulate, has more than passing significance.

I have chosen, coincidentally with the suggestion of Dean Sperry, to examine the Negro spirituals as a source of rich testimony concerning life and death, because in many ways they are the voice, sometimes strident, sometimes muted and weary, of a people for whom the cup of suffering overflowed in haunting overtones of majesty, beauty and power! For many years it has been a growing conviction with me that the clue to the meaning of the spirituals is to be found in religious experience and spiritual discernment. To be sure, the amazing rhythm and the peculiar, often weird 1-2-3-5-6-8- of the musical scale are always intriguing and challenging to the modern mind. The real significance of the songs, however, is revealed at a deeper level of experience, in the ebb and flow of the tides that feed the rivers of man's thinking and aspiring. Here, where the elemental and the formless struggle to a vast consciousness in the mind and spirit of the individual, shall we seek the needful understanding of the songs of these slave singers. The insights disclosed are not original in any personal or private sense. The unique factor of the

inspiring revelation is that, in the presence of their naked demand upon the primary sources of meanings, even without highly specialized tools or skills, the universe responded to them with overwhelming power.

In an essay included in a little book of meditations on Negro Spirituals published under the title *Deep River*, I located three major sources of raw materials over which the slave placed the alchemy of his desiring and aspiring: the world of nature, the stuff of experience, and the Bible, the sacred book of the Christians who had enslaved him. It was from the latter two that the songs of life and death originate. An examination of some of the insights to be found here is at once the purpose and proposal of my lecture.

Death was a fact, inescapable, persistent. For the slave, it was extremely compelling because of the cheapness with which his life was regarded. The slave was a tool, a thing, a utility, a commodity, but he was not a *person*. He was faced constantly with the imminent threat of death, of which the terrible overseer was the symbol; and the awareness that he

(the slave) was only chattel property, the dramatization. It is difficult for us, so far removed in time and mood from those agony-ridden days, to comprehend the subtle psychological factors that were at work in the relationship between slave and master. If a slave were killed, it was merely a property loss, a matter of bookkeeping. The notion of personality, of human beings as ends so basic to the genius of the Christian faith, had no authentic application in the relationship between slave and master. The social and religious climate were uncongenial to such an ethic. Of course, there were significant exceptions to the general rule—which exceptions, by the light they cast, revealed the great moral darkness by which the period was engulfed. The situation itself stripped death of dignity, making it stark and nasty, like the difference between tragedy and melodrama. Death by violence at the hand of nature may stun the mind and shock the spirit, but death at the hands of another human being makes for panic in the mind and outrages the spirit. To live constantly in such a climate makes the struggle for essential human dignity unbearably desperate. The human spirit is

stripped to the literal substance of itself. The attitude toward death is profoundly influenced by the experience of life.

It is important then to examine this literature to see what is revealed here concerning the attitude toward death. How significant is death? Is it the worst of all possible things that can happen to an individual:

Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!
Oh Freedom, I love thee!
And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Obvious indeed is it here that death is not regarded as life's worst offering. There are some things in life that are worse than death. A man is not compelled to accept life without reference to the conditions upon which the offering is made. Here is something more than a mere counsel of suicide. It is a primary disclosure of an elemental affirmation having to do directly, not only with the ultimate

dignity of the human spirit, but also with the ultimate basis of self-respect. We are face to face with a gross conception of the immortality of man, gross because it is completely exhaustive in its desperation. A radical conception of the immortality of man is apparent because the human spirit has a final word over the effect of circumstances. It is the guarantee of the sense of alternative in human experience, upon which, in the last analysis, all notions of freedom finally rest. Here is a recognition of death as the one fixed option which can never be taken from man by any power, however great, or by any circumstance, however fateful. If death were not implicit in the fact of life in a time-space dimension, then in no true sense would there be any authentic options in human experience: This concept regards death merely as a private option, private because it involves the single individual as if he and he alone existed in all the universe; option, because, while it assumes the inevitability of death as a factor in life, it recognizes the element of time which brings the inevitable factor under some measure of control.

The fact that death can be reduced to a manageable unit in any sense, whatsoever, reveals something that is profoundly significant concerning its character. The significant revelation is in the fact that death, as an event, is spatial, time encompassed, if not actually time bound, and therefore partakes of the character of the episodic. Death not only affects man by involving him concretely in its fulfillment, but man seems to be aware that he is being affected by death in the experience itself. There is, therefore, an element of detachment for the human spirit, even in so crucial an experience. Death is an experience *in* life and a man, under some circumstances, may be regarded as a spectator *of*, as well as a participant *in*, the moment of his own death. The logic here is that man is both a space binder and a time binder.

The second attitude toward death that comes to our attention is one of resignation mixed with elements of fear and a manifestation of muted dread —this, despite the fact that there seems to have been a careful note of familiarity with the experiences of death. It is more difficult for us to imagine what

life was like under a less complex order of living, than is our lot. We are all of us participants in the modern conspiracy to reduce immediate contact with death to zero except under the most extraordinary circumstances. We know that death is a commonplace in the experience of life and yet we keep it behind a curtain or locked in a closet, as it were. To us death is gruesome and aesthetically distasteful as a primary contact for ourselves and our children. For most of us, when members of our immediate families die, the death itself takes place in a hospital. Particularly is this true of urban dwellers. From the hospital, the deceased is carried to a place of preparation for burial, the mortuary. When we see the beloved one again, the body has been washed, embalmed, and dressed for burial. Our exposure to the facts involved, the silent intimacies in preparation for burial are almost entirely secondary, to say the least. The hospital and the mortuary have entered profoundly into the life of modern man, at this point. The result is that death has been largely alienated from the normal compass of daily experience. Our sense of personal loss may

be great but our primary relationship with death under normal circumstances tends to be impersonal and detached. We shrink from direct personal contact with death. It is very difficult for us to handle the emotional upsets growing out of our experience with death when we are denied the natural moments of exhaustive reaction which are derivatives of the performance of last personal services for the dead. Therapeutic effects are missed. Tremendous emotional blocks are set up without release, making for devious forms of inner chaos, which cause us to limp through the years with our griefs unassuaged.

This was not the situation with the creators of the Spirituals. Their contact with the dead was immediate, inescapable, dramatic. The family or friends washed the body of the dead, the grave clothes were carefully and personally selected or especially made. The coffin itself was built by a familiar hand. It may have been a loving though crude device, or an expression of genuine, first-class craftsmanship. During all these processes, the body remained in the home—first wrapped in cooling sheets and then "laid out" for the time interval before burial. In

the case of death from illness all of the final aspects of the experience were shared by those who had taken their turn "keeping watch." Every detail was etched in the mind and emotions against the background of the approaching end. The "death rattle" in the throat, the spasm of tense vibration in the body as the struggle for air increased in intensity, the sheer physical panic sometimes manifest—all these were a familiar part of the commonplace pattern of daily experience. Out of a full, rich knowledge of fact such a song as this was born:

I want to die easy when I die.
I want to die easy when I die.
Shout salvation as I fly,
I want to die easy when I die.

A quiet death without the seizure of panic, the silent closing of the door of earthly life, this is the simple human aspiration here.

As if to provide some measure of contrast, the age-old symbolism of the river of death appears in a song like this:

Chilly water, chilly water,
Hallelujah to that lamb.
I know that water is chilly and cold,
Hallelujah to that lamb.
But I have Jesus in my soul,
Hallelujah to that lamb.
Satan's just like a snake in the grass
Hallelujah to that lamb.
He's watching for to bite you as you pass
Hallelujah to that lamb.

In a bold and audacious introduction of still another type of symbolism which has all the graphic quality of the essentially original, revealing the intimate personal contact with death and the dying, this old, old song announces:

Same train carry my mother;
Same train be back tomorrer;
Same train, same train.
Same train blowin' at the station,
Same train be back tomorrer;
Same train, same train.

There is a sense of the meaning of death as a form of frustration (for those who remain) with a dimension of realism rare and moving in this song:

You needn't mind my dying,
You needn't mind my dying,
You needn't mind my dying,
Jesus goin' to make up my dying bed.

In my dying room I know,
Somebody is going to cry.
All I ask you to do for me,
Just close my dying eyes.

In my dying room I know,
Somebody is going to mourn.
All I ask you to do for me,
Just give that bell a tone.

In the third place, death is regarded as release, as complete surcease from anxiety and care. This is to be distinguished from that which may come

after death. We are thinking here of the significance of death regarded somewhat as a good in itself. The meaning of death in such a view is measured strictly against the background of immediate life experience. It is not a renunciation of life because its terms have been refused, but an exulting sigh of sheer release from a very wearying burden:

I know moon-rise, I know star-rise,
I lay this body down.
I walk in the moon-light, I walk in the star-light,
To lay this body down.
I walk in the graveyard, I walk through the graveyard
To lay this body down.
I lie in the grave and stretch out my arms,
To lay this body down.

Man, the time binder, one with the shimmering glory of moonlight and starlight and yet housed in a simple space-binding body, is heir to all the buffetings of the fixed and immovable, yet he can lay the body down and stretch out his arms and be at one with moonrise and starlight.

The note of the transcendence of death is never lacking—whether it is viewed merely as release or as the door to a heaven of endless joys. We shall examine the place and significance of the concepts dealing with that which is beyond death at a later point in our discussion. But the great idea about death itself is that it is not *the master of life*. It may be inevitable, yes; gruesome, perhaps; releasing, yes; but triumphant, NEVER. With such an affirmation ringing in their ears, it became possible for them, slaves though they were, to stand anything that life could bring against them.

It is next in order to examine the attitude taken toward life, because the attitude toward death cannot be separated from the attitude toward life. Was life merely a "veil of soul-making"? Was it merely a vast anteroom to the great beyond? Was it regarded as an end in itself? Or was it a series of progressions, a pilgrimage, a meaningful sojourn?

There seem to be no songs dealing with the origin of life as such or the orgin of the individual life in particular. Life was regarded essentially as the given —it was accepted as a fact without reflection as to

cause or reason. They were content to let the mystery remain intact.

Given the fact of life, there is much which has to do with interpretations of its meanings, its point and even its validity. In the first place, life is regarded as an experience of evil, of frustration, of despair. There are at least two moods in evidence here—one mood has to do with an impersonal characteristic of life itself. Loneliness and discouragement—such is the way of life. One cannot escape—such experiences are inherent in the process itself. Hence:

Let us cheer the weary traveler,
Let us cheer the weary traveler,
Along the heavenly way.

This has some elements similar to the philosophy of unyielding despair developed by Bertrand Russell in his essay on a Free Man's Worship.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home.

Here again is another song which reflects the same temper.

There is also the familiar note in:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!

All the reaches of despair are caught up and held in a trembling wail in:

I couldn't hear nobody pray,
Oh, I couldn't hear nobody pray.
Oh, way down yonder by myself,
And I couldn't hear nobody pray.

A climactic chord in the mood of the seventh chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is to be found in:

O wretched man that I am!
O wretched man that I am!
Who will deliver poor me?

My heart is filled with sadness and pain,
Who will deliver poor me?

The solitariness of the human spirit, the intensely personal characteristic of all experience as distinguished from mere frustration or despair is evident in such a song as:

I've got to walk my lonesome valley,
I've got to walk it for myself.
Nobody else can walk it for me,
I've got to walk it for myself!

Here we are in the presence of an essential insight into all human experience. It seems, sometimes, that it is the solitariness of life that causes it to move with such intensity and power. In the last analysis all the great moments of profoundest meaning are solitary. We walk the ways of life together with our associates, our friends, our loved ones. How precious it is to lean upon another, to have a staggered sense of the everlasting arms felt in communion with a friend. But there are thresholds before which all

must stop and no one may enter save God, and even He in disguise. I am alone but even in my aloneness I seem sometimes to be all that there is in life, and all that there is in life seems to be synthesized in me.

It is a matter of more than passing interest that this element of overwhelming poignancy is relieved somewhat by a clear note of triumph. Out of the fullness of a tremendous vitality the lowering clouds are high-lighted by an overflowing of utter exuberance:

I feel like a motherless child;
I feel like a motherless child;
Glory hallelujah!
Sometimes my way is sad and lone,
When far away and lost from home;
Glory hallelujah!

The same note appears in a softer key, expressive of a quiet but sure confidence:

Soon-a-will be done with troubles of the world;
Soon-a-will be done with troubles of the world;
Going home to live with God.

Or again the quality of triumph is to be found in the total accent of the song:

All-a-my troubles will soon be over with,
All-a-my troubles will soon be over with,
All over this world.

The second mood suggested in the interpretation of life as an experience of evil, of frustration, of despair, has to do with a personal reaction to the vindictiveness and cruelty of one's fellows. The mood is set in a definite moral and ethical frame of reference which becomes a screening device for evaluating one's day-by-day human relations. It would be expected that these songs would point indirectly to be sure, but definitely, to the slave owner. But for the most part, the songs are strangely silent here. Many indeed have been the speculations as to the reason for this unnatural omission. There are those who say we are dealing with children so limited in mentality that there is no margin of selfhood remaining for striking out, directly or indirectly, in a frenzy of studied fury against the slave owner. This

is arrant nonsense as the vast number of slave insurrections all through this terrible period will certify. There are those who say that the religion was so simple, so naïve, so completely otherworldly that no impression was made by the supra-immoral aspects of the environment; only a simple acceptance of one's fate. Any person who has talked with an ex-slave could hardly hold such a position. There seems to be a more comprehensive answer than any of these. The fact was that the slave owner was regarded as one outside the pale of moral and ethical responsibility. The level of high expectation of moral excellence for the master was practically *nihil*. Nothing could be expected from him but gross evil—he was in terms of morality—amoral. The truth seems to be that the slave owner as a class did not warrant a high estimate of ethical judgment. There is no more tragic result from this total experience than the fact that even at the present time such injunctions as "love your enemies," etc. are often taken for granted to mean the enemy within the group itself. The relationship between slave and master, as far as both the slave and the master were concerned, was "out

of bounds" in terms of moral responsibility. It seems clear, then, that the second mood has to do with those "we group" relationships of the slave and his fellow bondsmen.

Such is the meaning of:

Down on me, down on me,
Looks like everybody in the whole round world is down on me.
Talk about me as much as you please,
I'll talk about you when I get on my knees.
Looks like everybody in the whole round world is down on me.

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I am down,
Sometimes I'm almost on the ground
Looks like everybody in the whole round world is down on me.

To refer to the refrain of one other such song:

Oh, this is a sin-trying world,
This is a sin-trying world.

In the second place, life is regarded as a pilgrimage, a sojourn, while the true home of the spirit is beyond the vicissitudes of life with God! This is a familiar theme of the human spirit. We are dealing with a striking theory of time. Time is measured in terms of events, actions, therefore intentions and desires. All experience, then, is made up of a series of more or less intense meaning—units that may fall in such rapid succession that the interval between is less than any quantitative value. Within the scope of an event-series all of human life is bound. Freedom can only mean, in this sense, the possibility of release from the tyranny of succeeding intervals of events. The totality of life, then, in its existential aspects, is thus completely exhausted in time. Death in such a view means complete cessation of any sense of interval and therefore of any sense of events. In short, here death means either finality or complete absorption from time-space awareness. Whatever transpires beyond death, while it can be thought of only in terms of time-space intervals, is of another universe of discourse, another quality of being.

It is in order now to raise a question as to the

relation between *before* and *after* in terms of death and life. There seems to be no real break between before and after. Any notion of the continuity of life that transcends the fact of death is significant because of the advantage that is given to the meaning of life. Even though it be true that death is a process moving toward fulfillment in a single climactic event; as contrasted with life, death seems ever to be a solitary event; while life does not seem to be a single event but a process. Even at birth, the process of life seems to be well under way, well advanced. In the light of man's conscious experience with life, death seems to be a moment for the release of potentials of which the individual is in some sense already aware. Life then becomes illustrative of a theory of time that is latitudinal or flowing. On the other hand, death is suggestive of a theory of time that is circular or wheel-like.

Life always includes movement, process, inner activity and some form of irritation. Something more is implicit than what is apparent in any cycle or series of cycles that sustain all manifestations. In such a view, life takes on a definite character of timeless-

ness. There are no isolated, unrelated and, therefore, inconsequential events or moments. Every day is fraught with antecedents and consequences the logic of which is *inner relatedness* rather than *outer seeming*. Every day is a day of judgment and all life is lived under a continuous and inner scrutiny.

To think of life, then, as a pilgrimage means that not only is life characterized by an undertow of continuity but also that the individual has no alternative but to participate responsibly in that continuity. It is this concept rooted in the New Testament interpretation of the meaning of life that is to be found in many of the Spirituals. A few of such songs have been mentioned in other connections. One of the great utterances of this character is:

Done made my vow to the Lord,
And I never will turn back,
I will go, I shall go,
To see what the end will be.

My strength, Good Lord, is almost gone,
I will go, I shall go,

To see what the end will be.
But you have told me to press on,
I will go, I shall go,
To see what the end will be.

The goal of the pilgrimage looms large by inference in some of the songs. The goal is not defined as such in many of them—but the fact of the goal pervades the temper with which the journey is undertaken or endured. There is something filled with breathless anticipation and great strength in these lines:

Wait a little while,
Then we'll sing a new song,
Wait a little while,
Then we'll sing a new song.

Sometimes I get a heavenly view,
Then we'll sing a new song,
And then my trials are so few,
Then we'll sing a new song.

There is no attempt to cast a false glow over the stark ruggedness of the journey. The facts of experience are seen for what they are—difficult, often even unyielding:

It is a mighty rocky road,
Most done travelling.
Mighty rocky road,
Most done travelling.
Mighty rocky road,
Bound to carry my soul to the Lord.

Hold out your light you heaven-bound soldier,
Let your light shine around the world.

Of the sheer will to carry on under the compelling aegis of a great commitment, what could be more accurately expressive than:

Stay in the field,
Stay in the field,
Until the war is ended.

Mine eyes are turned to the heavenly gate,
Till the war is ended.
I'll keep my way, or I'll be too late,
Till the war is ended.

Here is still another variation of the same basic theme:

Oh, my good Lord, show me the way.
Enter the chariot, travel along.

Noah sent out a morning dove,
Enter the chariot, travel along,
Which brought back a token of heavenly love,
Enter the chariot, travel along.

What, then, is the fundamental significance of all these interpretations of life and death? What are these songs trying to say? They express the profound conviction that God was not done with them, that God was not done with life. The consciousness that God had not exhausted His resources or better still that the vicissitudes of life could not exhaust God's

resources, did not ever leave them. This is the secret of their ascendency over circumstances and the basis of their assurances concerning life and death. The awareness of the presence of a God who was personal, intimate and active was the central fact of life and around it all the details of life and destiny were integrated.

It must be borne in mind that there seems to be little place in their reckoning for the distinction between God and Jesus. In some of the songs the terms God and Jesus are used interchangeably—to illustrate:

Did you ever see such a man as God?
A little more faith in Jesus,
A preaching the Gospel to the poor,
A little more faith in Jesus.

For the most part, a very simple theory of the incarnation is ever present. The simpler assumptions of Christian orthodoxy are utilized. There was no elaborate scheme of separate office and function between God and Jesus and only a very rare reference

to the Holy Spirit. Whether the song uses the term, Jesus, or the oft repeated Lord, or Saviour, or God, the same insistence is present—God is in them, in their souls, as they put it, and what is just as important, He is in the facts of their world. In short, God is active in history in a personal and primary manner. People who live under great pressures, grappling with tremendous imponderables which left to themselves they could not manage, have no surplus energy for metaphysical distinctions. Such distinctions apart from the necessity of circumstances or urgency of spirit, belong to those upon whom the hold of the environment is relatively relaxed. Urgency forces a reach for the ultimate, which ultimate in the intensity of demand is incorporated in the warp and woof of immediacy.

It is the next in order to examine the large place given to the otherworldly emphasis in these songs. What is the meaning of Heaven, of the final Judgment? In such considerations we come to grips with the conception of immortality implicit and explicit in the songs, and the basis for it.

Again and again I have heard many people (in-

cluding descendants of these singers) speak disparagingly of the otherworldly emphasis as purely a mechanism of escape and sheer retreat. The argument is that such an emphasis served as a kind of soporific, making for docility and submission. It is further charged that here we are dealing with a clever device by which these people were manipulated into a position which rendered them more completely defenseless than they would have been without it.

Such an argument must be examined. In the first place, the facts make clear that religion did serve to deepen the capacity of endurance and the absorption of suffering. It was a precious bane! What greater tribute could be paid to religious faith in general and to their religious faith in particular than this: It taught a people how to ride high to life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that the environment, with all of its cruelty, could not crush. With untutored hands—with a sure artistry and genius created out of a vast vitality, a concept of God was wrenched from the Sacred Book, the

Bible, the chronicle of a people who had learned through great necessity the secret meaning of suffering. This total experience enabled them to reject annihilation and affirm a terrible right to live. The *center of focus* was beyond themselves in a God who was a companion to them in their miseries even as He enabled them to transcend their miseries. And this is good news! Under God the human spirit can triumph over the most radical frustrations! This is no ordinary achievement. In the presence of an infinite desperation held at white heat in the consciousness of a people, out of the very depth of life, an infinite energy took shape on their behalf.

Oh rise, shine, for thy light is a coming.
Oh rise, shine, for thy light is a coming.
My Lord says he's coming by and by.

Do we wonder then that they sang:

Oh religion is a fortune,
I really do believe.
Oh religion is a fortune,
I really do believe!

In the second place, this religious emphasis did not paralyze action, it did not make for mere resignation. On the contrary, it gave the mind a new dimension of resourcefulness. I had a college classmate who cleared his throat just before responding to the question of his teacher. The clearing of the throat broke the impasse between his mind and his immediate environment so that he could have a sense of ascendency in his situation. It was in some such fashion as this that these religious songs functioned. (Of course, they did much more than this.) Once the impasse was broken, many things became possible to them. They could make their religion vehicular in terms of the particular urgencies of the moment. "Steal away to Jesus" became an important call to those who had ears to hear. In other words, far from paralyzing action, religion made for detachment from the environment so that they could live in the midst of the traffic of their situation with the independence of solitude. The pragmatic results for them was an awareness that against the darkness of their days, something warred, "a strange new courage." To them

it was the work of God and who could say to them NAY?

We turn now to an examination of the place and significance of the notion of judgment. Taking their clue from the word picture given by Jesus in the Gospels, the Judgment was the climax of human history. This made a tremendous appeal to the imagination. The figure of Gabriel was added to the imagery of Jesus. There are many references to Gabriel:

O get your trumpet Gabriel
And come down on the sea.
Now don't you sound your trumpet
Till you get orders from me—

I got a key to that Kingdom
I got a key to that Kingdom
And the world can't do me no harm.

To mention the refrain of one other song:

Gabriel, Gabriel, blow your trumpet!
My Lord says he's going to rain down fire.

Some of these songs are almost pure drama. Consider this very old hymn, no record of which is to be found in any of the available collections:

Oh, He's going to wake up the dead,
Going to wake up the dead,
God's going to wake up the dead.
One of these mornings bright and fair,
God's going to wake up the dead.

The judgment is personal *and* cosmic so that even the rocks and mountains, the stars, the sea, are all involved in so profound a process:

My Lord what a morning!
My Lord what a morning!
When the stars begin to fall.

You will hear the trumpet sound
To wake the nations underground,
Standing at my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.

The matter of most crucial importance is this—a man is brought face to face with his own life—personal accountability is the keynote:

When the master calls me to Him
I'll be somewhere sleeping in my grave.
In that great day when he calls us to him
I'll be somewhere sleeping in my grave.

The deep intimacy between the soul and God is constantly suggested. Even the true name of the individual is known only to God. There are references to the fact that the designation, Child of God, is the only name that is necessary. This gnosis of the individual is an amazing example of the mystical element present in the slave's religious experience. The slave's answer to the use of terms of personal designation that are degrading is to be found in his private knowledge that his name is known only to the God of the entire universe. In the Judgment everybody will at last know who he is, a fact which he has known all along.

O' nobody knows who I am, who I am,
Till the Judgment morning.

Judgment takes place in time. It is a moment when the inner significance of a man's deeds is revealed. God shall deal with each according to his history. It was with reference to the Judgment that life took on a subdued character. Everybody is judged. The Judge is impartial. There is distinct continuity between the life on earth and the Judgment. Excuses are of no avail. God, the Judge, knows the entire story.

O', He sees all you do,
He hears all you say.
My Lord's-a-writing all the time.

Judgment was not thought of as being immediately after death. There is a time element between death and final judgment. Life, death, judgment, this was the thought sequence. When the final judgment takes place there will be no more time. What takes place after judgment has a necessitous, mandatory

character ascribed to it. Man can influence his judgment before death—after death everything is unalterable. This notion of the ultimate significance of life on earth is another aspect of the theory of time to which we have made reference. Here is a faithful following of the thought of the Gospels.

And yet there is more to be said concerning the idea of the Judgment. What does the concept say? Are we dealing with a matter of fact and of literal truth? If we are, then the symbolism of the Judgment is necessarily an essential symbolism. What is the literal truth seeking expression in this symbolism? It is this: The life of man is significantly capable of rising to the demands of maximum moral responsibility. That which is capable of a maximum moral responsibility functioning in the tiny compass of single events takes on the aspects of the beyond-event, hence beyond time, therefore eternal. The conclusion seems inescapable that man is interpreted as having only mortal manifestations, but even these mortal manifestations have immortal overtones. If this were not true then there would be no significance in the symbolic fact of judgment. The

literal truth requires a symbolism that is completely vehicular or revelatory.

Finally, we turn to an examination of the place and significance of the fact of Heaven in the thinking of these early singers. Heaven was a place—it was not merely an idea in the mind. This must be held in mind, constantly. The thinking about it is spatial. It is the thinking of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. "I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you I shall come again, and take you unto myself that where I am there ye may be also." "In my father's house are many mansions." These word pictures supplied a concreteness to the fulfillment of all earth's aspirations and longings. The songs are many, expressing highly descriptive language of this character:

I haven't been to heaven
But I've been told,
The streets are pearl
And the gates are gold;
Not made with hands.

What a plaintive wistfulness is found here:

In bright mansions above,
In bright mansions above,
Lord, I want to live up yonder;
In bright mansions above.

Such an aspiration was in sharp contrast to dimly lighted cabins with which they were familiar. Perfection, truth, beauty, even goodness are again and again symbolized by light. This is universal.

Heaven was as intensely personal as the facts of their experience or as the fact of the Judgment. Here at last was a place where the slave was *counted in*. He had the dignity of personal registration.

O write my name, O write my name,
The angels in heaven are going to write my name.
Yes, write my name with a golden pen,
The angels in heaven are going to write my name.

Heaven is regarded as a dimension of self-extension in the sense of private possession:

I want God's heaven to be mine, to be mine,
Yes, I want God's heaven to be mine.

Who is there that can escape the irony and the triumph in:

I got a robe,
You got a robe,
All God's children got robes.
When we get to heaven
We're going to put on our robes,
We're going to shout all over God's heaven.

There will be no proscription, no segregation, no separateness, no slave-row, but complete freedom of movement—the most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom.

All of these songs and many others like them argue for an authentic belief in personal immortality. In large part it is a belief growing out of the necessities of life as they experienced it. Family ties are restored, friends and particularly loved ones are reunited. The most precious thing of all was the fact that personal

identity was not lost but heightened. Heaven would not be heaven, it would have no meaning, if the fact of contrasting experiences was not always possible and evident. There was a great compulsion to know then a new and different life, which knowledge could only be real if the individual were able to recall how it once was with him. We are not surprised to find a great emphasis on reunion. There was nothing more heart-tearing in that far-off time of madness than the separation of families at the auction block. Wives were sold from their husbands to become breeders for profit, children were separated from their parents and from each other—in fact, from the beginning, the slave population was a company of displaced and dispossessed people. The possibility of ever seeing one's loved ones again was very remote. The conviction grew that this is the kind of universe that cannot deny ultimately the demands of love and longing. The issue of reuniting with loved ones turned finally on the hope of immortality and the issue of immortality turned on the fact of God. Therefore God would make it right and once again God became the answer.

This personal immortality carried with it also the idea of rest from labor, of being able to take a long sigh cushioned by a deep sense of peace. If time is regarded as having certain characteristics that are event transcending and the human spirit is not essentially time bound but a time binder, then the concept of personal survival of death follows automatically. For man is never completely involved in, nor absorbed by, experience. He is an experiencer with recollection and memory—so these songs insist. The logic of such a position is that man was not born *in* time, that he was not created by a time-space experience, but rather that man was born *into* time. Something of him enters all time-space relationships, even birth, completely and fully intact, and is not created by the time-space relationship. In short, the most significant thing about man is what Eckhart calls the "uncreated element" in his soul. This was an assumed fact profoundly at work in the life and thought of the early slaves.

This much was certainly clear to them—the soul of man was immortal. It could go to heaven or hell, but it could not *die*. Most of the references to hell are

by inference. Not to be with God was to be in hell but it did not mean not to *be*.

It is in order to raise the same question about heaven that was raised previously about the Judgment. Are we dealing here with a matter of literal truth? Or are we once again dealing with necessary symbolism growing out of literal truth? In other words, what is the intrinsic meaning attached to or to be drawn out of the concept of heaven? Is this mere drama or some crude art form? Certain facts are quite evident in the picture given. Heaven was specific! An orderly series of events was thought to take place. The human spirit rests—the fulfillment of the exhausted. A crown, a personal crown is given —a fulfillment for those who strive without the realization of their strivings. There is a room of one's own—the fulfillment of life in terms of the healing balm of privacy. There are mansions—the fulfillment of life in terms of living with a high quality of dignity. There are robes, slippers—the fulfillment of life in terms of the restoration of self-respect. The idea at the core of the literal truth in the concept of heaven is this—life is totally right, structurally de-

pendable, good essentially as contrasted with the moral concepts of good and evil. It affirms that the contradictions of human experience are not ultimate. The profoundest desires of man are of God, and therefore they cannot be denied ultimately.

Our ship is on the ocean but
We'll anchor by and by.

To use the oft-repeated phrase of Augustine, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless till they find their rest in thee." There is an order, a moral order in which men participate, that gathers up into itself, dimensional fulfillment, limitless in its creativity and design. Whatever may be the pressures to which one is subjected, the snares, the buffetings, one must not for a moment think that there is not an ultimate value always at stake. It is this ultimate value at stake in all experience that is the final incentive to decency, to courage and hope. Human life, even the life of a slave must be lived worthily of so grand an undertaking. At every moment a crown was placed over his head that he must constantly grow

tall enough to wear. Only of that which is possessed of infinite potentials, can an infinite demand be required. The unfulfilled, the undeveloped only has a future; the fulfilled, the rounded out, the finished can only have a past. The human spirit participates in both past and future in what it regards as the *present* but it is independent of both.

We may dismiss, then, the symbolism of these songs as touching life and death if we understand the literal truth with which they have to do. The moment we accept the literal truth, we are once again faced with the urgency of a vehicular symbolism. The cycle is indeed vicious. To be led astray by the crassness, the materialistic character of the symbolism so that in the end we reject the literal truth is to deny life itself of its dignity and man the right or necessity of dimensional fulfillment. In such a view the present moment is all there is—man is no longer a time binder but becomes a prisoner in a tight world of momentary events—no more and no less. His tragedy would be that nothing beyond the moment could happen to him and all of his life could be encompassed within the boundary of a time-space

fragment. For these slave singers such a view was completely unsatisfactory and it was therefore thoroughly and decisively rejected. And this is the miracle of their achievement causing them to take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, *worth living!* They yielded with abiding enthusiasm to a view of life which included all the events of their experience without exhausting themselves in those experiences. To them this quality of life was insistent fact because of that which deep within them, they discovered of God, and his far-flung purposes. God was not through with them. And He was not, nor could He be exhausted by, any single experience or any series of experiences. To know Him was to live a life worthy of the loftiest meaning of life. Men in all ages and climes, slave or free, trained or untutored, who have sensed the same values, are their fellow-pilgrims who journey together with them in increasing self-realization in the quest for the city that hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God.

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